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ABSTRACT

Focused on undergraduate education, the debate about the curriculum in higher education in the 1980s has been carried on primarily by the higher education system itself. Various national reports and national politics have, at most, provided the environment within which the college and university citizens make the real decisions on campus. However, because there is much at stake and because the culture of the university prizes consultation, decisions about curriculum are especially laborious and time-consuming. In fact, campus political systems do not seem to have institutionalized the capacity to make judgments about long-term concerns. We must think creatively about dealing with the lethargy of existing campuses and reconsider the substance and procedure of decisions about academic matters. Presidents, provosts, and boards of trustees need to create deliberative bodies for all segments of the college community, delegating authority and power where appropriate, and then resolving conflict through small, representative cabinets that advise the whole institution and whose word decides most issues. Most important is the belief that everyone is participating in a community that they have voluntarily joined, a strategy far more likely to improve the quality of American higher education than assessment, testing, and management by objectives. (KM)

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IT'S ACADEMIC: THE POLITICS OF THE CURRICULUM IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Never have so many said so much to achieve so little. This could be the judgment history will render about curriculum reform in American higher education in the 1980s. This essay will provide an analysis of the politics of the curriculum. It will focus on the campus based political system as it affects academic matters and the complex interrelationship between the campus and its larger social context.

I. THE NATIONAL POLITICS OF THE CURRICULUM IN THE 1980s

The 1980s version of the politics of the curriculum actually began in the mid-1970s with the appointment of Henry Rosovsky as Dean of Faculty at Harvard. He and Harvard President Derek Bok, along with a cadre of senior faculty, decided to begin a long process of reconsidation of the Harvard curriculum that culminated in 1979 when the Harvard faculty reintroduced a form of distribution requirements that focused on the skills they wished Harvard students to have at gradu-

ation. The jury is still out on the impact of that change at Harvard; its impact on the larger universe of American higher education is clear.

In the early 1980s, while American society was cutting budgets and coping with inflation, American higher education had already begun its own reconstruction. It resurrected distribution requirements on many campuses as a way of regulating the free market that had concentrated enrollments in management, engineering, and computer science. Campuses also restored a faculty role in decision-making, although that had eroded so that only the curriculum was an arena where the faculty could exercise authority. Serious financial pressures imposed by Federal budget cutting and weak state budgets severely constrained this decision-making process. These discussions even more reflected the territorial imperative of the departmental structure of the university where faculty control reigned supreme.

In this setting, Secretary of Education Terrell Bell appointed a distinguished panel of citizens to assess the state of elementary and secondary education. David Gardner, then president of the University of Utah, later to become the President of the University of California, chaired the group. This panel reported in 1983 in the now famous document A Nation at Risk.[1] This report characterized the public school system as so weak as to threaten the security of the United States. Its hyberbole generated a national reconsideration of quality in public education, in part because of its clever and catchy conclusionary statements and in part because President Reagan decided that it offered an agenda that he could adopt that would not cost the Federal Government money.

A Nation at Risk became a bible for educational reform at the local and state level. A number of Governors--e.g. Republican Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Democratic Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas--made substantial educational reform focussing on quality major political issues in their states. They also became interested in the quality of university education and made improvement of universities part of their overall educational plans. In both Arkansas and Tennessee, as well as many other states, the reform of teacher education became a state political issue. In Florida and Georgia, the state initiated testing programs for students mid-way in their college careers as well as for teachers. It is important to understand that these higher education initiatives flowed from A Nation at Risk and not from any higher education reports.

A Nation at Risk had profound impact on the public educational system because of the overt connection between all public school systems and local and state politics. The bully pulpit of the Federal Government had in fact ignited strong interest in the decentralized political system of public education. The role of this report in mobilizing public opinion was not unique in the history of public education--e.g., the Conant reports in the 1950s after Sputnik had a comparable impact--but the fact that A Nation at Risk had its impact without Federal money yet because of Federal politics offers an idiosyncratic lesson about the politics of reports. If a report serves a larger political purpose, its impact can be great. Indeed, the power of report generated outside of the educational system--higher or elementary and secondary--is completely dependent on the political invest-

ment in it. And in some ways it is easier for a report on public education to have substantial effect than one addressing its message to colleges and universities, because the non-partisan politics of elementary and secondary education is still quite public and accountable, whereas the tradition of autonomy of universities through boards of trustees and the standard of shared governance make the impact of external reports much more indirect than in the public schools.

A Nation at Risk had a threefold impact on campus. First, in a few states it led to the imposition from outside of testing programs (e.g., Florida and Georgia, generally, and many other states in regard to teacher education). Next, in many states the increases in funding for public schools also occasioned increases in state funding for higher education. Finally, this report seemed to spawn a number of reports focussing specifically on higher education, although many of these subsequent efforts were already in process when Risk was publicly presented. It is to these latter reports that we now turn.

Three general reports targeting undergraduate education followed within months after A Nation at Risk. First, then National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman William Bennett and a study group of advisors looked at the teaching of the humanities. Bennett wrote his report, To Reclaim a Legacy, that asserted the importance of revitalizing the humanities by strengthening the understanding of Western Civilization.[2] Bennett asked that institutions should agree on a core of texts that every student should read. He had his own list that became the touchstone for his report and the center of controversy in selection. Bennett's "great books of Western Civ" became the catch

phrase that characterized his arguments in campus discussions about the undergraduate curriculum. The high visibility of Legacy helped catapult Chairman Bennett into the position of Secretary of Education when Terrell Bell resigned.

After A Nation at Risk, Secretary Bell appointed a small group to review higher education and the implications of the earlier report for higher education. This group, chaired by Dr. Kenneth Mortimer of Penn State, published Involvement in Learning.[3] This report considered not only the curriculum but also the pedagogy and priority (or lack thereof) of teaching as well as the cocurricular environment for learning in universities and colleges. Involvement came to be known as the report that prescribed greater student engagement with the learning process. It called for more writing, speaking and creativity and fewer large lectures and impersonal learning settings. The higher education community identified Involvement with pedagogical method more than recommendations for curricular structure.

The third report following A Nation at Risk was from the Association of American Colleges. Professor Frederick Rudolph, the distinguished historian of the undergraduate curriculum in America drafted Integrity in the Undergraduate Curriculum[4] It listed six skill areas that set the standards for high quality undergraduate education and found that faculty had not given priority to these necessary skills in the structure of the undergraduate curriculum. The AAC report abjured text-centered recommendations or the use of Chinese menus, although the most probable outcome of the skills and knowledge areas approach is in fact a modified Chinese menu. Integrity emphasized

the importance of planned course sequence in undergraduate education as a tactic to offer greater coherence to the market driven reality in colleges across the country. The AAC report came to represent the importance of agreement about the skills needed by college graduates and a strong critique of the abdication of the faculty role in decisions about the curriculum as a whole.

These three reports provided the canon for the debate about the undergraduate curriculum as it evolved in the mid-1980s. Their impact was twofold: first, together they created momentum for campus discussion of the undergraduate curriculum at a level of visibility unseen since the late 1950s; second, they provided the footnotes for the particular discussions on individual campuses, although they did not--either one or all--dominate the reconstruction of the undergraduate curriculum that continues to proceed at this writing. Since all three were conclusionary and rhetorical rather than based upon substantial research and analysis about current campus reality, the actual debates focussed on parochial realities of given campuses. The three reports together framed the poles of the debates and offered appropriate justifications for just about any argument mounted or behalf of new curricular structure, although they all ruled out the recent approach of institutional abdication of judgment. Their rhetoric was their strength in that there was an aphorism for all seasons; it was also their weakness. Martin Trow, the distinguished Berkeley sociologist, concluded that these reports did more harm than good: "...because these reports, by substituting prescription for analysis, mislead our supporters and the general public into believing that these difficult problems are simpler than they are..."[5]

An important distinction between the impact of these reports and A Nation at Risk was that no consensus about the details of reform emerged in higher education. The policy debate about public schools quickly focused on the nexus between better teacher salaries and improved teacher competency through minimum skills testing for both teachers and students. The poles of the higher education curriculum debate in recent months have become two rather than three and are summarized in arguments between Bill Bennett and Derek Bok about the competing standards of the great books and skill areas. The substance and potential resource implications of this debate have meant that on most campuses the systemic inertia has limited change to the reintroduction of the Chinese menu as it emerged on most campuses after the Second World War. The campus based politics of the curriculum has been characterized by negotiations among departments about the hours devoted to general education and hours devoted to the major. These deliberations have resulted in a balance of power not unlike the treaties negotiated by Metternich or Kissinger.

The major campus response to this outside intervention has been a coalition of elite private and large land-grant institutions known as the Holmes Group, which has recommended that teacher preparation culminate in a five year masters' degree certification for teaching. This response does not represent a consensus, since many public institutions--particularly the former teachers colleges--and small private campuses are strongly committed to baccalaureate certification. The example of the debate about the nature of teacher education suggests that even when there is a substantial consensus in the larger society

for a need to change the substance of a particular part of the curriculum--either undergraduate or graduate--the tradition of institutional autonomy makes the politics of change very much a campus process. Each campus establishes its own curriculum and that curriculum is very much the sum of decisions taken in a decentralized departmental system on the campus. Even a weak school or department within the university--and departments and schools of education are the weakest in terms of campus political clout--still has great autonomy as it responds to external pressures.

Two national associations of states published reports on the state role in higher education. The Education Commission of the States published Transforming the States Role in Undergraduate Education, that counseled state interest but restraint in improving colleges.[6] The National Governors Association Task Force on College Quality published Time for Results: the Governors' 1991 Report on Education, that commented not only on the schools but also on the state interest in higher education.[7] Although these reports focused on state initiatives to monitor quality in higher education, they both distinguished between the more direct intervention possible in public elementary secondary education and the need to respect campus autonomy in higher education.

A new and different report is stirring the waters in the American higher educational pond, although it is premature to assess its impact. Ernest Boyer, the President of the Carngie Foundation, has written a book, College, that, unlike the previous reports, is a research-based critique of the undergraduate experience.[8] Boyer published an earlier report, High School,[9] that provided a research-based

analysis and set of recommendations that complemented A Nation at Risk and contributed to the debate about public education. College, in addition to its research base, is distinctive in two other ways: like A Nation at Risk, and unlike most of the other higher educational reports, Boyer has written for a general audience of parents, students, and policy makers as well as and even more than the academic community itself. He considers not only the curriculum but also emphasizes the cocurricular components of the undergraduate experience and makes substantial recommendations about the need for improvement throughout undergraduate education. Since the Carnegie Foundation invests significant resources in the dissemination of its efforts, College is likely to invigorate the continuing debate about undergraduate education and become yet another text that provides the footnotes for arguments on each campus.

The debate about the curriculum in higher education in the 1980s has focussed on undergraduate education, in part because the policy debate had ignored it and in part because the political economy and the disciplinary sociology had created a campus structure which made it difficult to look at the undergraduate curriculum as a whole. It takes a political debate outside of the particular campus to force each institution to confront the institution-wide issues, although the confrontation itself necessarily takes place on each campus. Even though the debate has been enriched off campus, it is essential to see that the higher education system itself has provided the brainpower for the enterprise. The panels that have fueled discussion have included faculty and administrators from higher education to a much greater

degree than those commissions reporting on the schools involved teachers and principals. The culture of campus autonomy has not been breached in so far as campus insiders have actually written the outside reports.[10] And the substantive focus on undergraduate education is part of a cycle of political discussion about education. It is only a matter of time until the focus will shift to the graduate and professional schools, particularly as the dominance of the elite research institutions and the sociology of knowledge become continuing themes in all of the reports. In all cases in regard to higher education, we will continue to be our own best critics and reformers, although we will continue to need and will have the external political pressure.

All of these national reports and the national politics of the curriculum at most provide the environment within which the college and university citizens make the real decisions on campus. Because curricular decisions emerge in a culture which emphasizes campus autonomy, we must consider in greater detail the paradigm of curricular politics as campuses play the game in the 1980s; only then may we begin to turn our attention toward the 1990s and the 21st Century.

II. THE POLITICS OF CHANGE: MAKING CURRICULUM DECISIONS ON UNIVERSITY STANDARD TIME

Commentators have always correctly viewed campus politics as especially Byzantine. Woodrow Wilson could say that he went to Washington from Princeton to find a less complicated political system. Many wags have observed that political conflict on campuses is so petty and mean because so little is at stake. Wilson was right; the omni-

present wag is wrong. Since substantive academic decisions are the heart of the university, much is at stake in these decisions: principle, status, resources. The very fact that so much is at stake and that the culture of the university prizes consultation make decisions about curriculum especially laborious and time consuming.

In many areas of university life, the faculty no longer has any meaningful role in decision-making. Yet it is in the arena of curriculum that the faculty role is still primary and certainly meets the standard set by the AAUP in its 1966 Statement on University and College Government.[11] This really means that even considering incremental decisions about the nature of departmental curriculum takes a long while to talk through. When an institution reviews its whole educational program for assessment and possible reform, one measures the consultative process in years not months. This leads universities to be very conservative institutions.

Clark Kerr has observed that most of the changes in American higher education have come from creating new institutions, not from dramatically changing old ones.[12] And the model of departmental dominance of research institutions has not changed significantly since the Second World War. Changes occur within institutions at the margin, seldom at the core. And they generally evolve over long periods of time. Even revolutions and coup d'tats on campuses take a couple of years. This fact that everything in universities takes so long to decide leads to what I call university standard time. The irony of this fact is that the knowledge produced and disseminated in colleges and universities is on the cutting edge. This new understanding becomes immediately avail-

able to the research community around the world, as does the latest rumor about the love life of a distant colleague. We may explain this discontinuity in the distinction between research dissemination and agreement for action.

To clarify the reality of curriculum decision-making for the whole institution, I have constructed a synthetic case of change drawn from a number of examples. This case draws from the case study database of the Carnegie Foundation study that led to College and from my own impressions drawn from over two hundred college visits. It is enough to offer only one example, because, in spite of institutional diversity and differences in detail from campus to campus, the paradigm I am about to describe is unusually typical across institutional types ranging from community colleges through elite private universities.

The example is a review of the undergraduate curriculum with special attention to what is or ought to be common in the required work for all students. The usual initiative for such a review comes from either a dean or a provost/academic vice president. Once the proposal for such a review emerges, it becomes the enterprise of the faculty senate or the university senate. The campus creates a committee, sometimes appointed by the president or provost, other times selected by the faculty, often chosen by both. It includes senior faculty carefully balanced by discipline and by educational ideology--particularly designed not to have too many innovators--with a sprinkling of senior administrators and one or two figurehead students.

The senior administrator(s) and the faculty charge the committee to review the undergraduate curriculum and the existing requirements or

lack thereof and then to report to the faculty senate for first review no later than "next term." The deliberations usually conclude two years later with implementation often no sooner than four years after the first discussion, with the outcome generally not substantially different from the Chinese menu where the conversation began.

In many community colleges, the academic dean--the equivalent of the provost--may take a much more active role and the faculty a more reactive role. In an historically Black college the campus president and its Title III Coordinator may be the only serious actors. An elite private university will have a council of elders composed of the most visible and senior professors and the dean of the undergraduate college as the main actors on stage with subsequent decision-making a fait accompli.

There are some extraordinary exceptions. A large private university in the West, facing near bankruptcy and precipitously declining enrollment, saw its newly installed president--himself a long-term faculty member--and the Board of Trustees pass a core curriculum without substantive faculty consultation and impose it on the faculty whose only leeway was in specifying the implementation. The legacy of this procedure was continuing faculty disaffection with the president and the board and lukewarm implementation. There is now general agreement that the core curriculum was a good idea and the fortunes of the institution seem to have improved significantly.[13]

The new president of a small private college in the East presented a general outline of a curriculum plan combining career preparation and a strong liberal arts program as part of his case for himself in the

hiring process. Soon after his selection, he presented a comprehensive plan to the faculty which then massaged it and devised its own implementation strategy in the course of approving the sweeping curricular changes. One must distinguish this latter example from the former in that the administration did not impose the curriculum. The faculty through traditional collegial consultation approved the initiative of the president.[14]

Both of these examples anticipated the national reports; the reports influenced neither. The first case implemented a very traditional core curriculum; the latter case substantively tried to harness the student careerism of the 1970s and 1980s to the traditional values of liberal education. Neither offered a strikingly new approach to the nature of undergraduate education.

It is important to understand that the quality of the educational venture begins in the classroom but also depends upon the whole campus environment. Ernest Boyer in College, following the precedent of Involvement in Learning, correctly includes in his review and suggestions a critical assessment of cocurricular life, the role of libraries, and the admissions process. The campus political process seldom gives this complexity its due, because the professionals engaged in the correlative work are second-class citizens in the campus political community. They are middle and lower rank academic administrators. They do not have the power of the purse vested in senior administrators. They do not have the collective authority of the faculty dealing with curriculum issues. They are not as well organized as a vocal student minority.

On campuses with university senates rather than faculty senates, one might expect the other constituencies to have more authority. But in fact, few university senates have worked effectively, and most seem to leave all participants feeling impotent. No campus political systems seem to have institutionalized the capacity to make judgments in the interest of the long-term instead of yesterday and today.

III. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING QUALITY AND REFORMING CURRICULUM

This account of the politics of the curriculum in higher education may discourage those interested in improving the quality of teaching and learning. Two caveats are in order: brevity has required an emphasis on one part of the curriculum--the undergraduate experience taken as a whole--not graduate and professional education or the departmental curricula constituting the major as a significant part; second, earlier Kerr made the point that substantively new opportunities were provided in American higher education by the creation of new institutions, not by the substantial reform of the old. Both of these caveats should moderate the message of most of this essay that the politics of the curriculum often precludes dramatic change. In particular programs on every campus, quality is effectively monitored and the substantive nature of the programs often changes surprisingly quickly through the individual actions of faculty at the lead in their disciplines and groups of faculty in departments committed to their students. As new organizational needs have surfaced at the systems level, new institutions have emerged. The creation of a national system of community colleges and the transformation of teachers colleges into comprehensive universities testify to higher education's flexibility.[15]

There should be a subsequent caveat on the caveats: it is easier to be flexible in a period of expanding rather than steady or contracting resources. The percentage of family income invested in higher education in the 1970s and 1980s has not changed significantly; inflation was about equal to increases in federal aid. Federal budget deficits and sluggish economic growth make it unlikely that vast new resources will be available in the 1990s as we move into the 21st Century. So creating wholly new institutions will be a very difficult goal to achieve. Therefore, we must think creatively about dealing with the lethargy of existing campuses. We do have a silver lining to the current grey: the retirement of faculty between 1995 and 2010.

The focus of the spate of reports and the efforts at curricular reform has been revision of requirements and reallocation of current faculty efforts in teaching and learning as well as the elevation of teaching and learning on the priority agenda of campuses. This focus has been eminently reasonable for the 1980s. But the time has now come to begin careful reconsideration of the substance and the procedure of decisions about academic matters. We can expect a fifteen year window for appointments--an opportunity unprecedented since the 1960s.[16] Decisions in the 1990s as to who will be appointed to faculty positions will set the course of higher education for the first half of the 21st century. To prepare for these judgments will require a political process quite different from that of the 1980s.

One lesson of the past few years has been that members of the university community--on particular campuses and nationally--are willing to enter into a serious discussion about the nature of teaching and

learning and debate quite vigorously the curriculum in a specific college or university. The problem has been that the deliberative institutions have been creaky in part because of lack of exercise. Many sectors of the campus community have not even been effectively heard. Neither the middle level administrators dealing with student life nor the alumni as a constituency prepared to take a more active role in the current life of the campus is considered an important factor in the contemporary campus political system. Presidents, provosts, and boards of trustees need to create deliberative bodies for all segments of the college community, delegating authority and power where appropriate, and then resolving conflicts through small, representative cabinets that advise the whole institution and whose word decides most issues.

Faculty in particular have felt quite strongly that the campus has excluded them from university-wide decision-making. The work on the curriculum may go some distance to correct this view, but it will not change until faculty believe they are consulted on issues of overall direction and the allocation of resources. This observation leads me to the most important lesson of the politics of curriculum of the 1980s for the 1990s and beyond.

The discussion of undergraduate curriculum or the reform of a professional school such as teacher education or medical training brings all of the members of the institution into a discussion about its heart and soul. If all of those with a stake in the outcome believe the "system" listens--even when their pet proposal does not gain institutional support--then a community evolves. The single most important

contributor to quality in the educational experience is the belief that everyone is participating in a community that they have voluntarily joined.

The best American institutions in the eyes of both faculty and students, according to the Carnegie Fundation surveys, are the selective liberal arts colleges.[17] In these institutions all members of the collegium believe they are important contributors to a community where they are respected and where the quality of life is high. The only other component of American higher education which has a similar self-image and probable reality is the handful of elite, private research institutions such as the Ivy League, Chicago, and Stanford.

In so far as a governance structure seriously considering academic matters can build such a community, it can actually contribute to the quality of American higher education. Such a strategy is far more likely to improve the quality of American higher education than assessment, testing, and management by objectives.

This essay has been about the politics of curriculum and not the substance of the debate, but before concluding, I wish to comment briefly on the substance, because it directly reinforces the importance of community to improving the quality of American colleges and universities. The three poles of the debate about undergraduate curriculum have been to do away with requirements to impose a substantial core curriculum, or to restore a more rigorous Chinese menu. The last has won most arguments.

I believe the recreation of a modern version of the core curriculum offers the best hope of creating the academic community which cares

enough to improve the quality of teaching and learning. I myself am a graduate of the core curriculum at Columbia that has served that institution well. It is highly unlikely that many institutions today can, through their consultative processes, create core curricula on such a scale. But it is not too optimistic to believe that all campuses can agree on a minimal core--a handful of courses that all students take and many faculty teach so that there is a common language of debate. One cannot match in any other way the contribution of some common texts and many common questions to a community of scholars. The process of negotiating agreement for a minimalist core itself can create trust, the all too rare basis of real community.

To agree on core skills instead of core courses is to begin the construction of common though often competing goals. The real act of community building is to commit to a pattern of courses that require both students and faculty to share effort and make choices of priority among the skills and substantive areas. The community building through agreement about a minimal core of common courses can build school and departmental communities as well. Communities of research emerge without borders; communities of teaching and learning emerge only we set new organizational and curricular borders and actively seek agreement for a majority of the campus citizens acting in the interest of the community.

Regardless of what we do self-consciously, significant changes loom on the horizon of learning. In addition to the turnover of personnel with the turn of the century, we are already in the midst of the infiltration of new technologies that students and faculty will bring

to the curriculum in a manner that could occasion profound change. Networks of microcomputers make possible patterns of study, interaction and research that can greatly improve learning. University standard time may become quite compressed in so far as networks of knowledge deliver participants from the need to resolve schedule conflicts and as they make available original data and research on a real time basis.

The social revolution driven by technological forces will not occur by majority vote; it will occur by mass connection. Political action will likely confirm these changes, but they will have already become a reality. The knowledge revolution--and the access of individuals directly to networks of knowledge is the revolution of the inexpensive microcomputer and optical laser media and communications--will change the power relationships of the players of the academic games. Brilliant lecturers will lose to superb seminar leaders and insightful computer conferencing chairs. Research librarians and microcomputer hackers will be teaching traditional faculty. The norm will continue to be "publish or perish," but publication may be to be stored in a prestigious computer bulletin-board or to be listed as a central participant in a select computer conference.

No matter how extensively networked we all become, electronic connections will never guarantee either community or quality, though they can contribute to both. All curriculum change depends upon academic politics, which is unlikely to change, unless there is as much campus political action as there is national educational talk. All academic change both begins and ends with writing and talking--what John Austin called "performative utterances," words that actually change things.

Our task is to understand the realities of academic politics in an institution that is engaged in technological evolution on a new scale through market forces. Only then will talk and reports be about academics but not academic. This is the leadership challenge as we turn to the 21st Century.

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